



**AUSTRALIAN LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT WOMEN'S  
ASSOCIATION**  
**VICTORIAN BRANCH**

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### **Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Election Administration**

ALGWA Vic is the State Branch of the National Association and serves to represent and advocate primarily for women who are elected to, or who are employed by, Victorian local governments and those women who seek to participate in local government. Its aims and objectives are:

- To assist in furthering knowledge and understanding of the function of local government
- To encourage women to participate in local government
- To encourage women to make a career in local government
- To watch over and protect the interests and rights of women in local government
- To act in relation to any subject or activity affecting local government and local government legislation
- To act in an advisory capacity to intending women for local government election

Thank you for accepting ALGWA Vic's submission to this very timely Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Election Administration, particularly the impacts from the recent Victorian Local Government elections and importantly applying a gender lens. The inclusion of experiences from these elections in this Inquiry, provides an opportunity to understand how social media can be both used more effectively or misused in the context of future elections, given that this Committee has oversight of the Local Government Act 2020.

These postal elections, conducted in a Covid-19 lockdown environment, greatly restricted candidates' ability to campaign in a way candidates in all elections have been accustomed to: out in the community, door-to-door, at public spaces and events – engaging face-to-face to convey political platforms, attributes, abilities, values and being open to scrutiny and questioning. That style of campaigning was restricted in metropolitan Melbourne and to a lesser degree in regional and rural Victoria. From the time that the State Government made the decision to proceed with these elections during the pandemic, it was deemed that social media would become a dominant campaign platform for candidates. While social media has many benefits, there are also negative impacts for candidates, and voters, and the impacts are likely to be different for women and men.

This submission cannot be a full representative sample of perspectives, observations and experiences from these current elections and from ALGWA's membership. As we know, counting has only just concluded and most candidates have not yet had the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of their campaign efforts. Neither has ALGWA had the time to consult broadly with its membership, therefore this submission draws on anecdotal feedback and observation gleaned from some candidates and those close to the elections as they unfolded.

**Recommendation:** *that the Committee invites direct feedback from all stakeholders involved in the 2020 Local Government elections before it concludes its Inquiry.*

ALGWA Vic commends the submission made by the convenors of More Women for Local Government (MWLG), a Facebook community that has positively supported women in, and aspiring to, elected positions in local government for some years and was particularly active during these current elections. This ALGWA Vic submission will not repeat the salient points made in the MWLG submission but provide some additional points for consideration in this Inquiry and its potential recommendations. The observations and experiences outlined below impact women and men, but in some circumstances may have a disproportionate impact on women and this should be explored as part of the Inquiry.

### **Observations of impacts of social media on the 2020 Local Government Elections:**

#### Use of Facebook Pages and Facebook Groups as campaign platforms

- 'Community' pages or groups that take an interest in local issues and have community members as 'administrators' and 'moderators' were able to misuse the page or group to promote some candidates with whom they were aligned, denigrating others and those associated with them through bullying and belittling. Some administrators did not comply with their own 'Group Rules', often shutting down healthy debate on issues contrary to their view or bias, and frequently evicting members who had a different view to their own or that of the candidate they were supporting.
- Candidates, or those closely associated or aligned with them (i.e. family members), who are administrators of community pages or groups (with thousands of members) using them for campaign purposes without appropriate authorization or disclosure to members. In this circumstance, they have a clear and undisclosed conflict of interest which is not readily apparent to vast memberships. They evict critics and block candidates who then have no ability to address or refute misinformation posted in these groups. Voters can be easily misinformed or misled.

**Recommendation:** *Candidates must be required to declare any associations with community or group pages prior to Election Period; remove themselves and close associates from the administrator / moderator role of any community or group pages and make declarations of same prior to entering into Election Period.*

### Misleading information and lack of ‘truth’ via social media

- Mistruths, lies and misleading information proliferate on social media. A staggering statistic from ‘The Social Dilemma’ is that ‘lies spread six times faster than truth on social media’ and that there is a breakdown of shared truth. There is no fact checking element for candidates in local government elections using social media, which is not the case using any other conventional and formalised print / publication medium. This is not unique to social media as candidates can actually lie in their printed materials but as self-publishers they are not easily held to account. One candidate in a metro LGA was observed posting misleading, threatening and potentially defamatory comments, and then deleting them soon after. If indeed ‘lies spread six times faster’, this could be deemed an effective way to spread defamatory misinformation and remove the chances of being held to account. Facebook has a reporting process for defamatory comments but was found to be ineffective in one cited example, making a determination that the complainant should take up the issue with the person who had posted the comment. This is all well and good except for the point below.

**Recommendation:** *It is difficult to regulate for ‘truth’ but there is a strong necessity to effectively deal with lies, misinformation and misleading comments through some form of accountability by candidates who can be proven to have lied in information published on social media.*

### Group attack and / or small scale ‘brigading’

- Evidence of ‘brigading’ of some candidates. People, some with dubious or fake profiles, ganging up on candidates in ‘opposition’ to other candidates and making negative, often intimidating, comments in unison or group style. This was also experienced by some former female councillors supporting candidates (female and male); their reputations were attacked in attempts to undermine candidates who were being encouraged or supported by them. Endorsement by a retired councillor has often been considered a benefit by a candidate but this election presented a different tone on social media for some. Bystander strategies ie: the Online Active Bystander Project developed by GEN VIC, while important, cannot counter these kinds of ‘brigades’ who engage in online slurring. For some reason they are more powerful and better organised than those who use social media for positive communications.
- Evidence of paid trolling by ‘bots’ to collapse a candidate’s Facebook page. A candidate paid trolls to post negative and defamatory comments on another candidate’s page with technology rather than actual users which hit the page so hard it could no longer function.
- Evidence of sponsored ads against candidates by individuals and developers unhappy with decisions made within the last Council term. A resident unhappy at not having their rates waived chose to sponsor ads against the incumbent candidate.

**Recommendation:** *Improved requirements for social media users to have authentic and traceable identities. Review negative tactics such as ‘brigading’ and provide greater support for initiatives such as the Online Active Bystander Project for more widespread adoption.*

### Advertising via social media

- Candidates who were aware of social media advertising, expending anywhere between \$50 (female independent) to \$7000 (party endorsed male), based on anecdotal feedback, had a potential advantage over other candidates with smaller budgets or who are less tech savvy. It is not clear whether voters are aware that they are seeing a paid advertisement or believe it to be an ordinary social media post. Was the cost of social media advertising of benefit to candidates, to voters or to the social media platform? Is advertising on social media platforms regulated in any way? It is understood that there is a transparent process to determine how much each candidate spent on advertising via Facebook and this would provide interesting analysis.
- Set up of Facebook advertising precluded some from using this – dependent on your profile set up.

**Recommendation:** *Investigate the use of social media advertising in these local government elections for noticeable trends such as uptake and level of expenditure and any need for regulation by the VEC i.e.: authorisations, statements to declare that posts are political advertising.*

This submission is by no means an exhaustive compilation of the impacts of social media on the current Local Government elections. It is an attempt to highlight that there was a marked change in use and tone on social media since the last elections and that the election landscape is not fully aware or capable of dealing with those impacts unless further investigation is undertaken.

The capability and capacity of the regulating agencies (Local Government Inspectorate and the Victorian Electoral Commission) to respond to complaints and enquiries about social media use should also be examined as there were experiences of candidates being misdirected or handballed to agencies through lack of clarity on who had responsibility for which aspect. Timeliness of response to an issue raised was also a concern. When elections are happening in a limited timeframe and issues are having a potential impact on result, an agile process for response is required.

There is an opportunity through this Inquiry to better understand the opportunities and threats social media offers, and the strengths and weaknesses of the election administration process undertaken by the VEC and Local Government Inspectorate in dealing with any emerging issues before the next Local Government elections in 2024. It is known that in the Covid-19 climate of these current elections and the reliance on social media, the LGI received a much higher volume of complaints, many of which undoubtedly related to social media, real or perceived, transgressions and these should be an important source of information to this Inquiry.

ALGWA Vic would be pleased to provide any additional information to the Committee should it be required.

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